

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2015/51/1378
Creation Date(s):	24 September 1985
Extent and medium:	4 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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S E C R E T

Meeting with Alex Attwood (SDLP Councillor, West Belfast),
Belfast, 21 September 1985

I met Alex Attwood, a SDLP member of Belfast City Council who topped the poll in the Upper Falls constituency in last May's local elections, in Belfast on 21 September. Attwood, a bright and articulate young solicitor, is politically ambitious and holds hard-line nationalist views. He is one of the lawyers' group within the SDLP which produced a paper on "Justice in Northern Ireland" for the party's last annual conference (recently published) as well as a more recent paper on a police complaints procedure. He is chairman of the Belfast District Executive and also a member of the party's Executive Committee.

Among the points which Attwood made were the following:

- Any disaffection within the party about the contents of an Anglo-Irish agreement will probably "focus around" Mallon. However, Attwood is certain that Mallon, at the end of the day, will not break ranks. He knows that he has no political future outside the SDLP. Part of his problem has been his inability to win over a significant section of the SDLP to his views, an inability which Attwood puts down simply to a lack of lobbying skills. His determination to remain within the SDLP may be gauged from the considerable efforts which he has been making in recent months to build up the party's organisation in the Armagh area with a view to capturing at the next elections the Westminster seat which he narrowly failed to win in 1983. Mallon badly needs a power base of this kind if he is to retain a position of influence within the party.
- For Attwood's constituents in West Belfast, what will count in any Anglo-Irish agreement is not the bureaucratic machinery set up but the visible, practical consequences

of such an agreement "at street level". The interface between the security forces and the nationalist community will be the benchmark of any agreement: nationalists will ask themselves if they are better-off in terms of how the RUC treats them on a day-to-day basis and will decide their attitude to the agreement accordingly.

- Having made this general comment, Attwood divided West Belfast voters into three groups: the "hard-core" of traditional SDLP supporters, who can be expected to support any agreement which Hume favours; a middle group of "undecided" voters (drifting between the SDLP and Sinn Fein), who will reserve judgement until they see how the agreement is working in practice; and the "hard-core" of Sinn Fein supporters, who can be expected to reject any agreement out of hand.

- Attwood's own view on the talks was initially negative. He is deeply distrustful of the British Government and suspects their good intentions. As Chairman of the Belfast District Executive (an informal constituency association), he caused a minor controversy in the party last December in the wake of the Chequers summit when he steered a motion through which called on the SDLP to resign from the Assembly. Shortly after his election to the Council, however, he was invited by Hume to the latter's Derry home (along with Adrian Coulton, another young SDLP lawyer). Hume talked to them at length about the value of the Anglo-Irish process and Attwood came away completely "sold" on the present talks. He reckons Hume's purpose was probably to enlist him as an ally in the event that Mallon forced a showdown in the party. His conversion was reinforced by an encounter which he had with the Taoiseach at a Young Fine Gael meeting in Cork earlier this year.

- In many respects, the future of the SDLP depends on the outcome of the Anglo-Irish talks. Attwood complains that

the party is confused and directionless at present and lacks a clear identity. While Mallon tries to boil down every issue to the simple question, "does this serve the interests of the Union, or of unity?", Hume prefers to have recourse to the more complex notions of "process" and "progress". Hume's over-subtle approach is not easy to sell to SDLP voters, though his "three R's" formula (reform, reconciliation, reunification) is a step in the right direction. The party is stagnating at present and Attwood hopes that the conclusion of an Anglo-Irish agreement will give it a new lease of life and encourage more young people to join (as happened, notably, around the time of the Sunningdale Agreement).

- The present malaise, in Attwood's view, is partly due to the fact that the party is not professionally organised and run and, indeed, at times seems more like "a collection of colourful individuals with their own local support groups" than a party.

- While the SDLP is strong in Derry, it is weak in Belfast, where there is intense competition from Sinn Fein. With the exception of Cormac Boomer, no SDLP Councillor lives in West Belfast. This undermines the SDLP's credibility and for this reason, among others, Attwood will be moving to West Belfast next year. In Mid-Ulster, there is also strong competition from Sinn Fein and Attwood fears a resounding defeat for the SDLP there at the next election, partly because Denis Haughey is not able to devote enough time to the area and is in any event too closely identified with Hume. Referring to the situation in Fermanagh, Attwood felt that the party had been unfair in its criticism of Fergus McQuillan some time ago (over intemperate remarks made by McQuillan on a "Today Tonight" programme in which Mallon had also participated).

- Attwood regrets that the document on "Justice in Northern Ireland", of which he was a co-author, was publicly

unveiled by Mallon rather than Hume. He feels that presentation by the party leader would have ensured a bigger impact (as there is a tendency for any initiative by Mallon to be seen simply as "Mallon sounding off again"). However, he regards the document itself as flawed in many respects, agrees with the misgivings expressed about the timing of its publication and takes more pride in a paper he helped to write recently on a police complaints procedure (which has yet to be formally approved by the party leadership).

- Attwood is one of twelve SDLP representatives (comprising most of the party leadership) who will travel to the US in October at the invitation of the National Democratic Institute. He welcomes the opportunity thus given to the party to revamp its organisation with the help of Democratic Party expertise. Noting that the party leader plans to stay for the first two days only, he joked that, with the prospect of Hume "running the show by himself for ten days", Mallon would probably announce on the third day that he had been unexpectedly called home by urgent business!

David Donoghue

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24 September 1985

cc: PSM
PSS
Anglo-Irish Section
Box
Embassy London
Embassy Washington